

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

AF SECURITY FORCES AND BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY  
EXAMINING CULTURAL COMPETENCY AS A FORCE ENABLER

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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3 February 2017

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## **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Shawn Covault received his Air Force commission in 1996 as a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy. He is a Security Forces officer with overseas assignments in Japan and Korea and multiple deployments throughout the Middle East including 3 combat tours in Iraq. Following his initial Security Forces training, he served as a flight commander, installation anti-terrorism officer, base defense instructor, and security forces operations officer. He deployed twice to Iraq as an SF operations officer with the 824<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Squadron, 820<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Group. He's been a squadron/unit commander four times leading small, medium, and large Security Forces squadrons, commanding two Regional Training Centers. He attended intermediate developmental education in residence at U.S. Marine Corps University, Quantico, VA, where he received his second graduate degree. Following Marine Corps Command and Staff College he was selected to command the Security Forces Police Transition Team deployed to Iraq from 2009 to 2010 attached to the U.S. Army. He returned to serve as a staff officer at Air Force Space Command followed by another Security Forces Squadron Command at Tinker AFB. Following his last command assignment he served as a J3 Joint Security Office Branch Chief at HQ U.S. Central Command. He is currently a resident student at Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

## **Abstract**

This paper examines challenges with U.S. military building partner capacity operations, specifically Police Transition Team missions, within a uniquely different cultural environment from both a historical and contemporary context. Building partner capacity in stability operations has been a significant task among many deployments over the past ten years, but how successful are those endeavors given the unique cultural challenges we face? If it is merely a “fool’s errand” beyond conventional core competencies, should senior military leaders be conveying that message to our civilian leadership, or is it a task we can and should measure up to? It will ask the question, should the Air Force and particularly Security Forces be involved in these types of missions in the future and if so, how can we better prepare those forces that take them on? The paper will initially approach this topic with some reference to the history of building partner capacity (BPC) missions. Briefly addressing BPC missions from Vietnam with some forgotten lessons learned. While discussing cultural competency broadly at the academia level, this paper will continually tie it back to contemporary deployment challenges recounting many personal experiences as a Security Forces commander executing the Police Transition Team mission in Iraq. Ultimately this analysis revolves around the importance of culture. Unfortunately, there is no common definition for culture. In academia it takes on numerous definitions.<sup>1</sup> One well published expert on the subject, Dr Ting-Toomey, defines culture as “a learned system of meanings that fosters a particular sense of shared identity and community among its group members.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the varied definitions, investing more time in understanding cultural characteristics with personnel critical to key leader engagements for building partner capacity missions is essential for success. Therefore, cultural competency functions as a true force enabler.

## Introduction and Thesis

Conventional military operations for the United States Armed Forces have become a fairly relative concept over the past couple decades. It is not uncommon for conventional missions to adjust amidst shifting security requirements, nor is it always necessary to refer to such changes as “mission creep.” Service members taking on new missions, such as building partner capacity (BPC), must exhibit continued flexibility in the face of change. This flexibility extends from “tooth to tail;” challenging planners, trainers, and acquisition professionals to appropriately train, organize and equip forces for these new missions. Despite the routine of change, watershed events are significant and demand special attention. In the aftermath of September 2001, conventional forces went through a true paradigm shift. Intervention with nations suspected of sponsoring terrorist activities became our national security focus. The United States confronted conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq where conventional missions rapidly transformed beyond traditional core tasks. Focus on counter insurgency (COIN), and BPC took center stage. Success in these new mission requirements relied heavily on cultural competency. This competency is essentially an awareness of ones’ own cultural traits relative to other cultures and the dynamic interplay that exists to effectively communicate across those tendencies.<sup>3</sup> New COIN and BPC challenges impacted all of our services after 2001, yet these challenges fell much harder on some specialties. Taking an in-depth look at the role of Air Force Security Forces (SF) executing a unique BPC mission can help draw out some cultural recommendations for the future. *The effectiveness of future Air Force SF engagement in non-conventional BPC (more specifically Police Transition Team) missions is best understood through the lens of improved cultural competency, which creates a foundation to enable BPC mission success.*

## **The Road Map.**

This paper will examine the cultural challenges U.S. military forces confront within building partner capacity (BPC) missions while immersed in uniquely different cultural environments. The general application of cultural analysis will span the tactical, operational, and strategic levels drawing upon BPC lessons from Vietnam and Iraq. This analysis will transition the bulk of attention into the most recent cultural challenges experienced by Security Forces in OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM working with Iraqi Police. Ultimately, the narrowed focus of this paper will drill down to the question of should Security Forces defenders execute police transition team missions, or similar BPC missions, in the future where cultural competency is an essential force enabler. If the task is appropriate and we can indeed expect to see similar requirements again, then to what extent should the Air Force be trained, organized, and equipped for these requirements. Specifically, how can we better prepare Airmen to excel within such culturally immersive missions in the future and how can cultural competency cut across many of the challenges those missions entail? The paper will draw upon cultural academia concepts that readily apply to the challenges of BPC operations and the PTT mission. Focus on the PTT mission in Iraq will recount the cultural experiences of my own unit as a deployed PTT commander and lead to recommendations for future consideration.

## **Brief history of BPC missions and cultural...looking back four decades.**

For many in the military it seemed as though counter insurgency (COIN) operations and all the baggage that accompanies COIN, stability operations, and building partner capacity was a relatively new concept. Prior to FM 3-24 being published, most felt as though they were

scrambling from one set of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP's) to another in the early years of OIF. The truth is, it really hadn't been all that long ago since our Department of Defense had faced similar challenges. In the late 1960's, the conflict in Vietnam had slowly evolved into a complex COIN and BPC effort. A weakened central government in South Vietnam was struggling with unconventional internal threats from Viet Cong insurgents while contending with conventional threats in North Vietnam. After interviewing a former military advisor to the South Vietnamese Army, I noted a number of similarities and differences within the BPC missions of Vietnam and my own BPC experiences in Iraq. The military advisor I interviewed was my father, Michael Covault. He was a U.S. Army Ranger Captain assigned to Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), part of MAC Team 74 imbedded with a BDE out of the 22 ARVN Infantry. Prior to his tour, he was sent to the defense language institute in California to learn Vietnamese and then trained with the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group for five months at Ft Brag prior to departure for his one year tour in Vietnam ending in December of 1971. His scoped down team of 14 Army personnel was significantly smaller than my team; but it seemed that the preparation he and his members received for that unique mission far exceeded that of my unit less than forty years later. Our missions varied in scope, scale, and the nature of each insurgent environment, but it seemed as though the premise of cultural awareness remained equally prominent for both building partner capacity missions.<sup>4</sup>

In South Vietnam the insurgency steadily grew as the Viet Cong sought to influence the population. Despite American and South Vietnamese battlefield success, over time the end game was lost in this conflict. The importance of culture was gradually embraced by the military at the operational level much to the benefit of my fathers' preparation by 1970, but it still lacked recognition at the strategic level. The national narrative of the Viet Cong and the North reached

a tipping point and ultimately prevailed as the North overtook the South shortly after the U.S. withdrew. Through the eyes of the indigenous culture, it wasn't a war for communism, it was a civil war for unification. "Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted, "I had never visited Indochina, nor did I understand or appreciate its history, language, culture, or values. When it came to Vietnam, we found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita."<sup>5</sup>

COIN doctrine amidst vastly different cultures, Vietnam and Iraq, was very much in demand for both conflicts; however, the hard-fought knowledge from Vietnam did not come to the forefront immediately in Iraq. These lessons had been learned through the expense of much blood and treasure at the tactical and operational levels in Vietnam after years of conflict. Unfortunately, COIN operational concepts were never formally captured and sustained until we were well entrenched in Iraq decades later. The Army eventually produced FM 3-24 for COIN Operations, which finally captured core principals to guide conventional forces. Although not a panacea to all insurgency dilemmas as many may have portrayed the field manual, this doctrine gained significant credibility across the joint force. The concept of "culture" and "cultural understanding" are reoccurring themes throughout the doctrine. Effective COIN operations require a greater emphasis on skills, such as language and cultural understanding, than does conventional warfare.<sup>6</sup> At the strategic level of culture, we are still seeking to better understand the dynamics in Iraq, given religious sects and tribal complexities. It may be that cultural understanding at the strategic level within Iraq will only be revealed in the hindsight of history, just as they were for former Secretary of Defense McNamara with Vietnam.



## **The Police Transition Team BPC mission in Iraq: context of the mission.**

As OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) transitioned from conventional phase three missions, one unique component of stability operations that fell hard upon the Army, specifically the Military Police, was fielding Police Transition Teams (PTT). Training a foreign civilian police force is far from conventional for any branch of the United States military. Direct involvement with civilian police forces is typically a forbidden concept that flies in the face of the “posse comitatus act,” a federal statute from 1878 prohibiting the use of military in civilian law enforcement.<sup>7</sup> The need for Police primacy grew as the security situation in Iraq worsened following de-bathification, and a subsequent rise in sectarian violence commenced. Coalition forces quickly realized the need to reconstitute and develop a capable Iraqi Police force as violence spiraled. The U.S. Army found itself in short supply of Military Police to take on this massive challenge. These conditions led to a Request for Forces (RFF) submission from United States Central Command to the Joint Staff seeking assistance across the services for a cross service specialty capable of assisting the Army MP’s in meeting the PTT mission. The U.S. Air Force saw an appropriate fit with Security Forces personnel and took on the PTT mission under RFF 619, augmenting the U.S. Army Military Police in OIF. Examining the accuracy of that fit more than five years since this mission’s conclusion is a natural byproduct of assessing the cultural challenges embodied this mission.

## **Leading a Police Transition Team (PTT) in Iraq and traversing a cultural minefield.**

For Defenders, most deployments during OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM were grounded in base defense core tasks on forward operating bases (FOBs). Host nation

interaction occurred on FOB's, but they were primarily brief in nature, near the base perimeter. A few SF patrols went beyond the perimeter, outside the wire (OTW) as it is often referred to, for increased defense in depth and to cover key terrain while countering indirect rocket or mortar fire. These types of OTW missions occurred at varying times, different locations, and to varying degrees based on threats, terrain, mutual support, and senior leader risk acceptance. Security Forces were limited in their exposure to the COIN environment, occasionally interacting with local village populations near FOB's in the first three years of OIF. I took part in some of these missions as an operations officer while assigned to and deployed with the 820<sup>th</sup> Security Forces Group. This limited cultural immersion changed significantly for a few SF personnel when a new tasking was levied to build partner capacity (BPC) with the Iraqi Police in an advise and assist role for the Police Transition Teams (PTT).<sup>8</sup>

Despite deploying to Iraq multiple times for base defense, when I was selected in 2008 to command a SF squadron for the PTT mission, I knew none of my experience would compare with what laid ahead. I was good friends with the first unit commander to take on this mission in 2006. The 824<sup>th</sup> SFS Ghostwalkers, commanded by Tom Miner, took on the very first PTT mission. He took command of the 824 SFS within the same year I PCS'd from the 824<sup>th</sup> to take my own squadron command in Nevada. The PTT mission was Toms first combat deployment with the Ghostwalkers. We met up at a SF conference shortly after his PTT deployment and discussed his experiences over some beers. He recalled in general terms many of the cultural nuances/challenges, combat losses, and then showed some graphic photos from the mission....I hadn't forgotten any of that. I understood the challenge that laid ahead, but would ultimately revisit many of the same cultural issues with no better cultural preparation than what Tom had.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that cultural challenges were key factors in all the SF PTT tours, from Tom's first team

in 2006 to my team closing the mission with Det 3 in 2010. We kept re-learning some of the same cultural lessons despite experiences from previous teams because we didn't fully understand what was behind their meaning. Collectively my unit and I went through a barrage of cultural lessons learned in our one year tour; I will touch upon a few to illustrate the concepts of "face-work management,"<sup>10</sup> "high and low context" communication variances, as well as "haptics,"<sup>11</sup> interpreter dynamics, corruption, and "power distance"<sup>12</sup> within cultural competency.

Before diving into cultural memoirs from this mission, it is only prudent to provide some initial background and context on my unit for these deployed cultural experiences. My squadron was assembled from individual volunteers across the entire Air Force, resulting in zero sub-unit integrity across our team from the start. Unlike the very first PTT tasking taken on by the 824 SFS, which enjoyed complete squadron integrity. The 220 plus defenders for my team in 2009 were a patchwork arrangement of no more than 2 Defenders from any one base. Additionally, I had an attachment of intelligence, supply, mechanics, and admin specialists pulled from different units. When we arrived in country the Army attached medics, a communication NCO, and 30 linguists to Det 3. Including training, we were deployed for 14 months as a medium sized AF SF unit, assigned to the Army. RFF 619 was part of an Air Force series of Joint Expeditionary Task (JET) missions, formerly referred to as "In Lieu Of" (ILO) missions, and my unit was specifically assigned to Police Transition Team operations. My units formal designation was the 432 ESFS/Det 3 Police Transition Team. Our mission was to enhance operational capabilities with the Iraqi Police (IP's) for maintaining law and order within Baghdad, thus establishing police primacy for improved security. We were completely imbedded with the Iraqi Police OTW, interacting with them beyond the FOB's, in their stations and on their streets, totally

immersed within their culture on a daily basis. Before we were mission complete, Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNFI) stretched my unit dangerously thin as MP units departed OIF. Our PTT mission expanded more than any other in the history of PTT missions. I point out these facts not to be boisterous nor to complain, but simply to place perspective on the cultural complexities that will be covered later in this paper. Understanding the lack of cultural preparation for our BPC mission, a mission focused on thriving within a foreign culture, originates at the beginning of my squadrons assembly, training, and preparation.

We trained with the Army for two months at Ft Bliss, Texas and honed our combat skills across a broad spectrum; but we received very little instruction on operating as advisors, let alone any cultural competence training. The time spent on combat life saver (CLS) training, fire and maneuver, battle drill TTP's, close quarter battle, etc....was all well spent, vital training, and helped build much needed sub-unit cohesion as we went through multiple combat engagements during our tour with insurgents. In those engagements we took some casualties; however, I'm certain the CLS training alone saved several lives and limited those casualties. Prior OIF experience varied across my team of defenders, but all experience was related to deployed base defense. This team hadn't worked together and none had ever functioned as advisors with 100% of the mission outside the wire. Strengths and weaknesses had to be learned across the board. Combat skills were relatively easy to assess and improve upon with my cadre of defenders. The less tangible skills sets needed for success as advisors were much more elusive yet had a significant impact on operational effectiveness. I relied heavily on my new S3 operations staff, and flight leaders (Capt, Flt Commanders and MSgt, Flt NCO's) to identify the most capable squad leaders (TSgts) to take on these unconventional BPC tasks. Limited assessment

opportunities with my NCO's and CGO's for cultural competency led to challenges down range. The first incidents I'll discuss bring some of this to light.

One early lesson learned is a classic example of cultural "face-work" management which is all about the interaction strategies that we use to maintain, defend, or save the social images of others.<sup>13</sup> Once we hit the ground in Iraq and completed our relief in place/transition of authority with the outgoing PTT, we were immediately tasked with new metric tracking requirements from higher headquarters, the Army had identified various Measures of Effectiveness (MOE's) to be assessed. The metrics we had to track spanned more than 29 separate Iraqi Police (IP) units under our initial watch in southern Baghdad, known as the Rashid Districts. Our tour began with us operating out of Forward Operating Base Falcon, overseeing 26 IP stations and 3 IP district headquarters. The types of items being tracked were weapons and equipment accountability, vehicle maintenance, personnel accountability, etc.... We were tasked to track each of these items based off of varying percentages in a color coded method for each of the police stations and police chiefs and then report that information up the chain of command in what was called the Police Station Monthly Report (PSMR). These tracking requirements made perfect sense; however, they led to conditions that initially strained relations, and it was establishing a relationship that mattered most to the Iraqi Police. This dynamic led to continual face-work management within an intercultural communication process that was all but foreign to my Airmen, yet were now daily leadership challenges of significance. Nearly all the IP stations executed poor equipment maintenance and accountability relative to U.S. standards and some stations simply conducted none at all. But this observation was being made from a very ethnocentric perspective; however, having never received any cultural competency training we failed initially to take that into consideration. While still seeking to establish a rapport and

relationship with our new partners during Key Leader Engagements (KLE), we were constantly pressing them on these logistical and administrative matters.<sup>14</sup>

The Iraqi police would routinely tell us they were provided very little equipment and what was provided continually broke despite maintenance. They would then follow that up with a request to us to provide more equipment. Of course we knew all of this to be completely inaccurate as we had detailed records of everything prior units had already provided these stations. We never saw maintenance being conducted unless we were directly over their shoulder walking them through it step by step, much less documented. The condition of their equipment clearly reflected this negligence. So the face-work challenge continued as we sought to prevent the station Police Chiefs and district IP Directors from losing face as we desperately tried to help them, help themselves. These conditions led to many awkward KLE meetings early on. We came to realize that the Police Chiefs were stockpiling equipment, but not even documenting it, rather than issuing it across their force. We also learned from their perspective that the leadership possession of this equipment increased prestige and influence, sometimes referred to as “Wasta,” and they felt as though this was diminished once the gear was issued out in mass. This seemed absurd to us; however, this perception seemed to be universally maintained across most the stations given a few exceptions. Ultimately, we noted all findings just as they were in the PSMR but adjusted our approach with the IP Chiefs and didn’t press them as hard on equipment that had already been issued, while explaining we were not in a position to provide additional equipment any longer. But we could work with them to improve the maintenance and the sustainability of what they did own up to. By helping the IP station Chief save face on these issues, we were able to slowly build a rapport and work toward other training goals. Gradually, this change became visibly noticeable as the IP Chiefs began to

physically demonstrate various nonverbal cultural haptics<sup>15</sup> such as full embraces (man hugs and kiss to the cheeks) during greetings and literally holding the hand of my officers and NCO's as they moved about the stations during visits. Haptics are a distinctive form of non-verbal communication that articulate unique meanings through touch behavior.<sup>16</sup> These cultural haptics were all unique to the region which functions in what is considered a high-contact culture,<sup>17</sup> these traits were indicative of our working relationships becoming stronger and more positive. Although a positive indicator of BPC progress, I was even thrown a bit back the first time an IP Directorate held my hand as we walked.<sup>18</sup>

Another significant facework management challenge involved working with the IP stations on personnel accountability and pay. Each station had a specific number of police assigned on the personnel records according to the jurisdiction size; however, many of the IP's would fail to show up for work on any given shift and we soon learned that many of them didn't exist at all. The term used for these nonexistent personnel was "ghost police." The "ghost police" were fictional names assigned to positions that were never truly filled. We found out that the Iraqi government provided pay, in the form of hard currency, for those positions and then various levels of IP management would pocket that money for themselves because all pay was handled in cash. Certainly a corrupt practice by most western standards; however, it turned out the practice was known throughout the Iraqi bureaucracy. It appeared that so long as this practice didn't become excessive, the Iraqi Minister of Interior turned a blind eye to it. Our PSMR reflected exactly what we were able to assess in terms of gaps with "ghost police," but again we had to adjust our ethnocentric viewpoint as we worked with them.<sup>19</sup> After coordinating with HHQ who was well aware of this corruption, we took on an ethno-relative<sup>20</sup> perspective rather than risk a stonewall partnership with the IP stations. An ethno-relative perspective is "to

understand a specific behavior from the other person's cultural frame of reference."<sup>21</sup> An ethno-relative mindset enables flexible intercultural communication which we were quickly learning.<sup>22</sup> My unit and the MP BDE were told to leave the personnel accountability issue to the Iraqi government and simply adjust our expectations as it related to IP operations. In private our unit began to refer to this manpower perspective as "Iraqi math." If we were helping an IP station chief plan a sweep an area for an insurgent weapons cache or raid an insurgent cell that would typically require "x" number of IP officers, we would simply increase that number by roughly 20%, or whatever the going "ghost police" percentage was for that area, expecting about that same percentage of officers to be unavailable or not show. In the end we would end up with the right force level for the mission. As backward as it seemed, this approach worked and the Iraqi police were able to save face without continuously being called out on their lack of personnel accountability within our western cultural standards.<sup>23</sup>

Another key cultural factor within BPC missions involves the proficient use of interpreters. Most career military personnel have worked through translators or interpreters at one point or another. Certainly if they had assignments overseas, even if they haven't actually deployed. But there is a distinct difference in working through interpreters in a combat zone OTW while conducting BPC operations and working with mere translators in a relatively safe garrison environment. Working effectively through interpreters in a BPC mission is essential, and "on the job training" is less than ideal. My unit operated with both Category (CAT) 1 and CAT 2 interpreters provided through TACON Army channels under the centrally managed Iraqi wide GLS contract. Det 3 interpreter numbers fluctuated significantly throughout the tour depending on numerous factors including changing mission requirements and availability. For most of our tour we maintained more than 30 linguists to support our operations to allow for 2



linguists with each station movement. Matching the right squad, flight, or headquarters leadership with the right linguist is far from a precise process, but it can make a significant difference in a KLE with an Iraqi counterpart. We learned these lessons while executing the mission. By the middle of our tour we had found the right fit across the board and had replaced linguists that couldn't be relied upon for either proficiency and effectiveness or simple trustworthiness.

The value of a quality interpreter far exceeded the paycheck they received, but an untrustworthy one could make you as vulnerable as hitch-hiking unarmed through the center of Sadr City. We inherited one linguist after initial arrival that I believe played a nefarious part in setting our team up for an ambush. Building trust with your linguist wasn't just a matter of ensuring a key advisory concept was conveyed to the IP's, sometimes it was a matter of combat survival. They had to trust we would protect them, and we had to trust that they interpreted not only what was said, but what was meant and implied during an exchange. A white house interpreter once explained, "The interpreter's work begins with hearing spoken words that are used as signals by the speaker to convey ideas, facts, or messages. This process is fraught with many dangers and pitfalls that can cause confusion."<sup>24</sup> Some interpreters fell short of mission needs for a variety of reasons or proved to be untrustworthy and were fired. A first rate interpreter that was trustworthy and in sync with you was invaluable. Sometimes it was a problem with the Defender, ultimately we found some squad leaders couldn't work effectively with any interpreters. In time most squad leaders learned how to dialog at the ideal rate of speech with our interpreters and gauged the best moments to pause in a conversation, while the interpreters learned how to capture the right cultural tone of what we were conveying and that of our counterparts. The best interpreters were critical in the early months as they explained some

subtle cultural intricacies interacting with the IP's and tuned us into key sacred values.<sup>25</sup>

Effective interpreter use, concepts, and traits could have been addressed in pre-deployment training and placed us well ahead of a valuable learning curve.

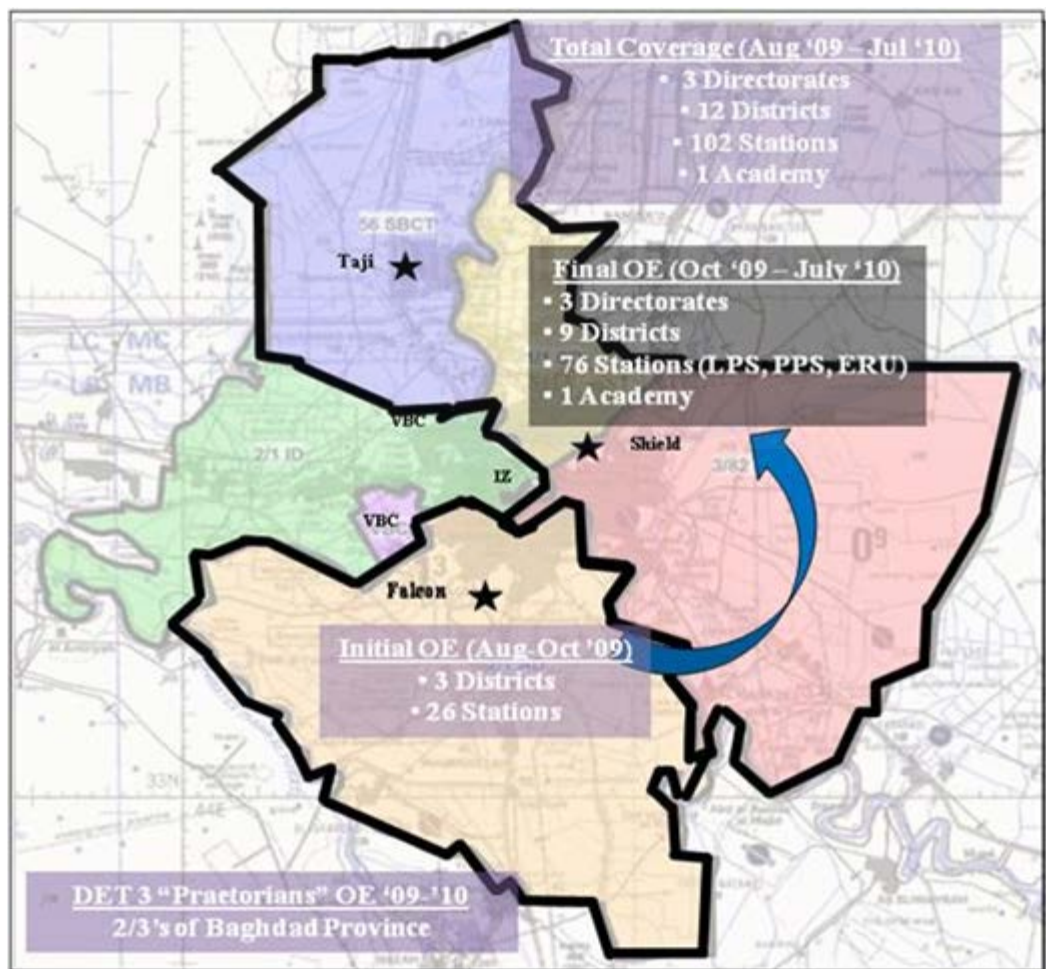
To demonstrate another cultural disconnect, U.S. and Iraqi cultures operate at opposite ends of the power distance construct. "The power distance value dimension refers to the extent to which individuals subscribe to the ideology of equal power distribution and the extent to which individuals subscribe to the ideology of equal power distribution and the extent to which members adhere to unequal power distribution in an interaction episode within a society."<sup>26</sup> Iraqi culture functioned within a high power distance construct typical of collectivist societies,<sup>27</sup> while the U.S. operates in a low power distance construct typical of individualistic societies.<sup>28</sup> This was significant as I had a limited number of officers and senior NCO's to cover the large number of IP stations where IP Colonels and Generals were in charge. Already at a disadvantage in partnering with a cultural variability perspective, assigning of the right personnel to take the lead on those KLE's was imperative given the already skewed perception of power distance in Iraqi culture. Some personnel simply did not have the right aptitude for the routine challenges of intercultural communication and I had to reassign them; often taking one step back before taking two steps forward. We may have established even better IP relations early on had we received sufficient intercultural communication training, or if I'd been able to better identify those with the best aptitude for intercultural communication; however, missteps were recoverable.<sup>29</sup>

Coupled with the challenge of matching the right personnel (NCO's and junior officers) to effectively partner with the IP's was the significant growth of our operating environment (OE) and mission responsibilities only 3 months into our tour. Our operating environment tripled from 3 districts with 26 IP stations covering 600 square miles in southern Baghdad to 9 districts

with 76 IP stations covering 1,800 square miles of the province. Det 3's OE took on a massive scope and essentially shifted North and East, covering an area previously assigned to 2 MP Battalions straddling the Tigris River and responsible for over 1,900 Iraqi Police securing a population of 4.5 million Iraqi civilians. It was comparable to advising all the police of Chicago or Los Angeles and their suburbs. On top of that, we were also tasked to run the Iraqi Police Academy out of Camp Taji. The new mission and OE also involved partnerships with IP Higher Headquarters for 3 Directorates reporting directly to the Iraqi Minister of Interior. We had to relocate our entire base of operations, and tactical operations center from FOB Falcon to Camp Taji while splitting up portions of my unit geographically to Joint Security Station (JSS) Shield and JSS Istiqlal. This hindered some operational capabilities but enhanced force protection due to the extended movements that would have been required across such a large OE.

Ultimately, this enormous mission growth meant that relations carefully groomed over the initial months were less prominent and we had to begin building new relations with vastly more partners. Consequently, we simply could no longer visit as frequently based solely on the numbers and the distances to travel. We were stretched dangerously thin which made it significantly more difficult to be effective partners. Having the right culturally attune personnel teamed in right areas took on an even greater significance given some of the geographic separation of my unit. Establishing new partnerships on such a broader scale may have been less culturally significant in another low-context western culture; however, Iraq's high-context culture focuses more on the personal relationship of individuals rather than the basics of operational needs.<sup>30</sup> In our original operating environment we could visit the same stations several times a week with our teams, now we were lucky if we could visit the same station once a week or even once every two weeks in some areas. In addition to this challenge we had to

operate and build up the Taji Law Enforcement Academy for the Ministry of Interior. This was a full time endeavor with a constant flow of IP classes, requiring us to secure the compound where the students lived and trained. My unit was stretched dangerously thin for the remaining 9 months, tackling a mission and operating environment that an entire MP BDE of more than 1000 soldiers covered before, now covered with only 220 Defenders. These increased mission requirements made IP station partnerships less effective in a high-context culture. The map below provides a visual reference to the significance in growth of station coverage. The other photo shows the IP Law Enforcement Academy, graduating nearly 30 students every week.



## **Answering the question and recommendations for the future**

Given my own BPC experience with the Police Transition Team and the U.S. Army, it is clear to me that these types of missions are indeed an appropriate fit for Security Forces defenders. If Combatant Commands require forces for future police transition team missions, both Security Forces and Military Police can meet the task with equal ability. Although the PTT mission is a challenge within certain cultures, as these vignettes have portrayed, Defenders can best blend key law enforcement tenants with general security principals for improved partner capacities. This is a mission that the Air Force should truly own. That said, we could be much more effective if provided increased knowledge on intercultural communication prior to BPC deployments. Additionally, it's always wasteful to re-learn the same lessons for success that were garnered from predecessors, whether it is COIN or BPC related. When my father went to Vietnam nearly four decades ago as a military advisor, the government spent twice as much time and effort in his pre-deployment preparation than my PTT unit received in 2009. He arrived with a better understand of the language and cultural dynamics as he took on his advisory role. Why wouldn't a similar level of investment in cultural preparation have been extended for the PTT mission? Although not all 220 defenders needed to receive advanced language and cultural training, sending flight leaders, squad leaders, and key leadership staff to additional training would have had a significant impact on earlier mission success in Iraq. A few months of language training wouldn't negate the importance of our interpreters; on the contrary, it would have enhanced the relationship, creating a better foundation for effective communication. Absent of additional language training, even limited training on the most effective interaction with interpreters would have helped.

The most universal recommendation I have arrived at is to suggest increasing the overall cultural competency of all future BPC leaders. There are universal themes and concepts within cultural studies and intercultural communication that would prove helpful to BPC units and the key leaders taking on these missions across any foreign culture. The concept of “cultural mindfulness” alone would be a prudent tool to any BPC team member executing key leader engagements. “Mindfulness refers to the heightened awareness of our own thinking patterns, affective reactions, and preferred behavioral routines and also extend this particular awareness to understand the culturally unfamiliar others’ frame of reference.”<sup>31</sup> True cultural competency will go beyond understanding mere cultural norms and can actually help shift the units key partnership perspective and mindset in such a way that greater mission effectiveness can be obtained earlier on with a more lasting effect.

The appropriate resources are already available to our Airmen today through the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC). This organization is based at Maxwell Air Force Base under Air Education and Training Command and has close ties with Air University. The AFCLC develops cultural curriculum materials, and although not tasked to formally support BPC type missions, it is well within their skill set. Future BPC missions could ensure that part of the pre-deployment training was routed through the AFCLC, either sending key leaders here or having AFCLC faculty travel to the pre-deployment power projection base. After interviewing AFCLC staff I began to understand the full potential that this organization in relation to support of future building partner capacity mission tasks.<sup>32</sup> The AFCLC staff has traveled to provide training through individual requests with units at Air Force Special Operations Command; therefore, a positive precedent already exists. The AFCLC also provides General Officer pre-departure acculturation (GOPAC) training. The concept for the AFCLC began in 2006, but it



really hadn't materialized until 2010.<sup>33</sup> With such a valuable resource now readily available, it would almost seem neglectful to not leverage such an opportunity. Beyond just the training aspect, continuity of cultural lessons learned may abound with the AFCLC. Although the Air Force A9 is typically the focal point for Air Force lessons learned, it may very well be appropriate for an organization such as the AFCLC to be the focal point for institutionalizing cultural lessons learned in partnership with the A9.

Another recommendation specific to future PTT missions is to reconsider how security forces organize and equip when taking them on. The initial direction this tasking took seemed to be the most appropriate before the Air Force veered from it. Instead of bringing 220 piecemeal defenders together to take a mission like the PTT, the Air Force should simply look to the standing 820<sup>th</sup> Base Defense Group (formally Security Forces Group) from Moody AFB. The 820<sup>th</sup> is already task organized to take on these types of complex challenges with 3 squadrons of approximately 220 personnel. Each unit is already embedded with intelligence officers, mechanics, and individual duty medical technicians that train together regularly to operate in austere and hazardous combat environments. I navigated significant challenges pulling together the 220 unfamiliar defenders to take on the PTT mission. I had to replace my Chief Master Sergeant before we even departed training at Fort Bliss. He had a complete mental breakdown in the middle of our training, was hospitalized and sent home. My operations officer was relieved of duty for cause due to unprofessional conduct half way through our tour. Only 5 of the original 9 initial squad leaders finished the tour without having been replaced for a variety of reasons. These were just some of the administrative personnel challenges the unit faced while conducting the most dangerous SF mission in the Air Force. Despite the myriad of challenges, we persevered, remained culturally resilient and still achieved unprecedented levels of success. Of

course personnel challenges can happen in any AF organization, but putting such a high stress mission across an entire unit lacking familiarity is not the best recipe for success. A unit such as the 820<sup>th</sup> constantly trains together, already know everyone's strengths and weaknesses, maintains increased combat preparation with organic equipment, and could better focus on cultural competency for the unique key leader engagements that will be required.

The 820<sup>th</sup> Base Defense Group appears to be moving towards an alignment with BPC missions at part of their mission essential tasks. Although not formally established, following an interview with the current 820<sup>th</sup> BDG, Col Kevin Walker, this concept is part of his strategic initiative. They are becoming much more aligned with key bi-lateral exercises throughout various Combatant Commands. Their priority mission essential tasks align them with the SECDEF's Global Response Force (GRF). Taking on BPC missions like the PTT or advising foreign partners on effective base defense could be their #2 mission essential task in the future. Although not specified in my interview, in time the 820<sup>th</sup> may even find itself associating the three squadrons with geographic specialties much like the Army Special Forces community is. This could certainly allow for improved cultural awareness and language abilities regionally with greater depth. Even if specialization becomes a bridge too far, focusing an organization like the 820<sup>th</sup> on true cultural competency will allow for institutionalizing the appropriate mindset to entering any foreign culture.

## **Conclusion:**

Building partner capacity in stability operations has been a significant task for nearly two decades and will continue into the future. Although U.S. forces completely departed Iraq in 2012, we find ourselves back there again today continuing to help build partner capacity with the



Iraqi government as they confront ISIS. The sectarian divide within the Iraqi culture is immense and at the source of many BPC challenges, it certainly was for the police transition teams. My team confronted these challenges in significant ways, but I chose to leave those examples out so I could approach this topic, and a broader audience, from an unclassified perspective.

Ultimately, many of the cultural issues and the motivations of various terrorist or insurgent groups have strategic importance. Recognizing the cultural significance of those divides is imperative to positive end states for building partner capacity. We underestimate cultural competency at our own peril on all levels, tactical to strategic.

At the tactical level, my unit and I slugged through many cultural minefields in our exhaustive year. Some cultural challenges were relatively minor, sometimes even comical, while others were truly serious. Although I've addressed just a few of the numerous cultural nuances and challenges experienced throughout our tour of duty, they demonstrate the critical need for cultural competency at various levels. I was unfamiliar with cultural academia theories, models, and methods used to explain these experiences, but in the aftermath of two Air War College electives with AFCLC, I have better insight. I understand these experiences with a more informed perspective now and know that I (and my key PTT leaders) could have better executed the PTT mission had some of that knowledge been imparted on us before we hit the ground. Some senior leaders recognize the role of cultural competency for BPC success, while some may simply view past BPC experiences like the PTT as a passing anomaly. Those same opinions may also view such missions beyond the future needs of the U.S. Air Force and relegate those responsibilities to another service. Entrenched opinions grounded in service tradition do not change easily; however, I'm confident that given the due course of time and the continued trend

of missions, the Air Force will embrace the prominence of future BPC missions as they continue to enhance national security.

Despite the challenges we confronted, in hindsight I think my unit navigated the many cultural pitfalls fairly well given the lack of cultural training provided. We were truly culturally resilient, if there is such a term; and if such a term doesn't exist, it should. After all, resilience is basically the ability to withstand, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands. When those stressors and demands center on culture, the term fits. I'm proud of my Defenders from the Det 3 PTT "Praetorians," and I'm proud of the mission we accomplished. We achieved some historic OIF achievements with the Iraqi Police, imparting sensitive site exploitation and forensic analysis capabilities that had never been achieved at their level. We helped the IP's close out a record number of case file investigations on some of the highest threat individuals in Baghdad. We bolstered police primacy through targeted community policing operations across two thirds of Baghdad Province, these were benchmarked across all of Iraq. We enhanced force protection across IP stations and election polling stations, resulting in an 80% decrease annually in IP station attacks and zero attacks on our district polling stations in northern Baghdad for the March 2010 election. Our districts were the only ones in all of Baghdad province without an attack. Those polling site assessments were also benchmarked across the country. The "Praetorians" achieved this and much more despite significant adversity with a force stretched dangerously thin, and zero cultural training. Just think of the success we could have achieved had we received some cultural training. Just think of the success future Defenders or any joint warfighter in a BPC mission may achieve if provide the right cultural competency to function as a true force enabler.

## Dismounted patrols and community policing with the IP's



Praetorian's 2-6 and 2-3 at Tarmiyah PPS prior to patrol

Conducting dismounted foot patrol validation with IPs from Tarmiyah IP station into local market



Airmen over-watch with IPs



Defender and IP get on the same page; emphasizing effective "Community Policing" operations.



## 2009-2010 Det 3 Police Transition Team, the proud "Praetorians" of Baghdad



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- <sup>1</sup> Gal Luft, *Beer, Bacon, & Bullets, Culture in coalition warfare from Gallipoli to Iraq*, (Booksurge Pub, ISBN, 2009) 1
- <sup>2</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, John G. Otzel, *Managing Intercultural Conflict effectively*, (Sage Publications, London, 2001)9.
- <sup>3</sup> Notes obtained within AU/AWC Effective Global Communication elective class with Dr. Steen. 2016
- <sup>4</sup> Interview with Michael Covault, 28 Dec, 2016
- <sup>5</sup> Montgomery McFate, "The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture" *JFQ*, issue 38, (2005) 42.
- <sup>6</sup> FM 3-24, COIN Operations, 1-23
- <sup>7</sup> [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/posse\\_comitatus\\_act](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/posse_comitatus_act)
- <sup>8</sup> Shawn Covault, *Cultural Analysis with Iraqi Police*, (Air University, Elective Paper, Global Communication, 2016) 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Col Tom Miner, 14 Nov, 2016
- <sup>10</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, *Understanding Intercultural Communication*, (Oxford University Press, NY, NY, 2012), 199.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 301
- <sup>14</sup> Shawn Covault, *Cultural Analysis with Iraqi Police*, 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, *Understanding Intercultural Communication*, 48.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.
- <sup>18</sup> Shawn Covault, *Cultural Analysis with Iraqi Police* 3.
- <sup>19</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, *Understanding Intercultural Communication*, 11.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>23</sup> Shawn Covault, *Cultural Analysis with Iraqi Police*, 4.
- <sup>24</sup> Harry Obst, *White House Interpreter, The Art of Interpretation* (Author House, Bloomington IN, 2010) 37.
- <sup>25</sup> Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy, Faith Brotherhood, and the unmaking of terrorists*, (Harper Collins Publishers, NY, NY. 2010) 382.
- <sup>26</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, *Understanding Intercultural Communication*, 48.
- <sup>27</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, John G Oetzel, *Managing Intercultural Conflict effectively*, (Sage Publications, London, 2001) 28-31.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.
- <sup>29</sup> Shawn Covault, *Cultural Analysis with Iraqi Police*, 4.
- <sup>30</sup> William B. Gudykunst, Stella Ting Toomey, Tsukasa Nishida, *Communication in Personal Relationships Across Cultures* (Sage Publications, London, 1996), 29-35.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 305
- <sup>32</sup> Dr. Steen, Air Force Culture and Language Center, interview conducted. Dec 2016.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, same interview



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